

CHARLES RIVER WATERSHED STUDY

RECREATION INTERIM MEMO #1

OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION ASPECTS OF THE LOWER BASIN

Boston's 19th century planners created the superior urban environment which residents and visitors have enjoyed in this part of the 20th century. A first glimpse of the blue waters of the Charles River alive with skimming white sails brings a common thought to mind:

"What a wonderful thing to have in the middle of the city."

This wide, cool and vivid open space of water sets a dramatic foreground for the old red brick houses, the church steeples and the high-rise buildings of "the New Boston," and creates a city skyline of magical splendor, comparable to the skyscrapers of Manhattan seen against the Hudson River, or San Francisco rising on its hills across the Bay.

It is no accident that this visually exciting experience is here to enjoy. Foresight and imaginative planning in the last part of the nineteenth century are responsible for Boston's appeal as a city.

Bainbridge Bunting, in a Boston Globe article of July 21, 1967, entitled "The Back Bay," names these planners of an earlier generation.

"Because of Arthur Gilman's Commonwealth Avenue, because of Frederick Law Olmsted's Park System, and because of the open stretches of the Charles River, the 20th century inhabitant, standing in the heart of the city and looking out into sprawling modern Boston, can enjoy the restorative qual-

ities of space and greenery so rare in other urban centers."

". . . all in all the present century should be enormously grateful for the Back Bay and its authors. The 19th century planners preserved the Charles River despite repeated attempts to engulf it in short-sighted real estate profiteering."

The Charles is indeed "A wonderful thing to have in the middle of the city." An eight mile protected basin provides an expansive water area, suitable for many kinds of recreational boating. Contiguous to the basin are public parks which protect this recreational resource from encroachment and provide a wide variety of passive and active recreational experience.

Two major events were responsible for the aesthetic beauty and the recreational opulence of today's Charles River Basin. The first was the establishment of Boston's Metropolitan Parks System in 1893. Under the inspirational guidance of Frederick Low Olmsted,\* and Charles W. Eliot, Landscape Architects, a system of public ocean beaches and inland parks were acquired. Included were park lands surrounding the Charles. The second event was the construction of the Charles River Dam in 1910. This eliminated the problems of tidal fluctuations of eight and more feet and resulted in a uniform water level. The dam also made the basin relatively free of salt water. Another important by-product of the constant water

\*Olmsted also planned and executed New York City's Central Park's development.

level was the much more attractive appearance of the banks, formerly exposed mud flats at low tide. The Dam included locks through which boats could enter or leave the basin. The park lands rimming the basin became much more usable as a further result of this major improvement, and the Metropolitan District Commission has been able to provide a variety and quality of recreational enjoyment unsurpassed in any other comparable city.

Without listing all the various recreational opportunities of the lower basin, a few highlights will suffice to give the picture. The waters are used intensively by oarsmen of universities, schools and private rowing clubs; by sailing pavilions and clubs; and by power boats, both luxury cabin cruisers and outboard motor boats. The MDC has permitted boating interests to construct boathouses, docks, slips, and other moorings, and also has provided a number of public docks. Extensive park facilities have been installed along Embankment Road and Storrow Embankment. These include children's playgrounds and wading pools; tennis courts; athletic fields; a swimming pool; shaded walks, benches and shelters; grassy areas for sunbathing; and the Hatch Memorial Shell, and Esplanade, scene of Starlight concerts initiated nearly forty years ago by Arthur Fiedler conducting Boston Symphony musicians. This entire recreational complex is free of any automobile traffic. Access is limited to pedestrians and bicycles who may enter on bridges located at various points over Embankment Road and Storrow Memorial Drive.

The Charles River Basin and its surrounding green open spaces form an important part of urban life, and their use by residents of Boston, by thousands of university students, and visitors is incalculable. The city is often hot and sultry in summer time. Arthur Fiedler selected the Hatch Shell area for its almost invariable coolness in the warmest summer weather. The history of these concerts has fully justified this choice.

The 19th century architects of Boston's superb environment planned well. However the headlong currents of progress and population explosion during the beginning of the second half of the 20th century make it imperative to plan equally well for the next generations. This is not nearly as simple a task as it was in the Nineties, and future needs are complicated by a variety of demands by today's population in the lower basin of the Charles River. On 1 July 1965, Congress directed the Corps of Engineers to work with the cities and towns and the state agencies responsible for natural resources management in the Charles River Watershed, in the preparation of a comprehensive long-range plan which will best utilize the unique natural and human resources of this watershed. The study is now in progress. The basic land and water resources of the lower basin are more valuable than ever. However conflicts of use and other problems have been identified. A few of these will be discussed in an ensuing interim memo.